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THE COTTON MILL A FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH

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Being deeply interested in welfare work, defined by the National Civic Federation as "the *voluntary* effort of an employer to better the working and living conditions of the employees". I have made, during the last year, a special study from personal observation of examples existing in mill towns in New England and our Southern States. Through this investigation I have become more or less familiar with the cotton industry as a whole.

The sociologist tells us that civilization is brought about by the contact of individuals one with another, permitting of communication, companionship and mutual aid; and to quote from an eminent professor at Columbia University: "These are ensured by the unequal distribution of food supplies, the varying degrees of temperature and moisture, the topography and other physical circumstances making life in some places easier than in others." We may assume, then, that any industry which gathers together in communities numbers of persons who have previously led restricted, isolated lives is a factor in the civilization of the country where it is found.

Those familiar with the history of cotton manufacturing in New England tell us that the first impetus toward uplifting the social status of the working people of that section was given by the cotton factory. If such has been the case in New England, more especially has it been so in the South, with this added advantage: that whereas in New England the factories are for the most part grouped in a few large cities where the tendency toward over-population produces unpleasant conditions, in the South they are distributed through a large number of small towns, ranging in size and importance from the town of one cotton mill with 150 to 200 operatives—and probably no other manufacturing enterprise in the locality—to the city of ten or a dozen cotton factories employing several thousand wage-earners who live in settlements surrounding the mills.

Recent Development

Broadly speaking, there was no such industry as cotton manufacturing before the Civil War, with the exception of a few scattered, ill-equipped factories, and the industry has only reached its present gigantic importance through a growth that has taken place since 1880.

Now what of the operatives who have made this industry possible? From where and what do they come? Before the war the white population of the Southern States was composed of two classes—the owners of valuable and productive plantations, which they cultivated by slave labor, and that unfortunate class familiarly called “poor whites”, generally illiterate, immoral and indifferent, who worked out a precarious existence on some unproductive bit of land or barren mountainside.

This latter class was augmented after the close of the war by families who had lost everything, and, never having had to work, were without any capacity for it.

Poor Whites

These “poor whites”, broken in spirit or without ambition if of the class that had always been poor, finding that they could not hold their own unless they moved away from the populous sections, isolated themselves in the mountain districts of North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee, where there were no schools, no churches, no railroads. Here they built of logs, houses consisting of one room, or at most two, with mud-stopped chinks and almost invariably a mud floor, where the family, two or a dozen in number, all slept in one room.

Surrounded by such environment, living lonely lives, without opportunity of communication with any other life, far from the influence of men of larger intellect and broader experience, with scanty food, morals increasingly lax, and without regard for laws of state or nation, their condition was at least lamentable. Many became engaged in “blockading”—that is, making and selling liquors without license, cheating the government of revenue. And the tendency was for a lower social condition each year, and with each generation, until this class of people seemed nearly hopeless.

How long ago were these conditions to be found? Within twenty-five years. Within the last dozen years. In some parts to-

day as I have seen with my own eyes. It is safe to say that of the 110,000 operatives now employed in the manufacture of cotton goods in the South fully three-quarters, or 80,000, came from families who twenty years ago were poverty-stricken agriculturists. I have seen these people arrive at the mill door with all their worldly goods stowed away in one farm wagon drawn by dilapidated mules borrowed from a not too-distant neighbor, having driven perhaps forty miles, and sometimes having to ask immediately for money in advance from the superintendent of the mill in order to buy food.

Welfare Work

What are the living conditions they find in these mill villages? Generally they have good, new houses of from four to six rooms each; kindergartens, schools, churches, and frequently club-houses, and in the more advanced villages the mill companies support a welfare worker and sometimes a trained nurse. At one mill town in South Carolina I saw as complete and modern a little emergency hospital as one could wish for anywhere. Others have since been built. In every mill village of any importance in either North or South Carolina or Virginia I found some sort of welfare work for both elders and children. I cannot believe that anywhere is there a finer spirit or stronger wish to uplift the weaker classes than among some Southern mill owners. And all of them are ably seconded by the women of their families.

The first generation of operatives coming from conditions above described brought fingers so stiffened, hands so hardened by toil as to be totally unfit for handling the soft, unspun cotton; it followed that the children, with still supple fingers, were pressed into service as spinners.

I wish to point out the significant fact that the second generation is awakening to the importance of sending its children to school and keeping them out of the mills during their tender years. Furthermore, in many cases children in the mills are there through the exigencies of peculiar circumstances.

Progressive manufacturers are seeing the fallacy of child labor. Now, no one of any humanity, especially no mother, can see a little child at work in a mill, with all that this may mean, without a feeling of horror and indignation. No circumstances make child labor right. But child labor is one phase in the evolution of the Southern cotton industry. And it is surely passing.

Even in our natural abhorrence of its existence under any conditions we must try not to lose sight of the picture as a whole, but believe that there are some extenuating circumstances on the side of the Southern manufacturers, who, by the resumption of the cotton industry at the close of the reconstruction period, in a measure, came to the rescue of the masses of the South, who, as I have pointed out, were reduced to the depths of poverty and ignorance.

A Plea for Co-operation

Is it not possible in these days when a spirit of co-operation is taking the place of hostility to show a man gently wherein he is in error rather than to arouse his antagonism by seemingly condemning him without a hearing? There is nothing like getting two people of adverse opinions face to face to break down their opposition. And, oh! how far we can influence if we try in a spirit of love! Love is the universal solvent!

A writer of fiction tells of a party at a haunted country house, where the ghost visited each guest in turn; and each one in relating his manner of receiving it and the impression made upon him unwittingly bore evidence of his own gospel. There was the professor who tried scientifically to explain away its existence; the clergyman who sought to banish the fear aroused by it, to quiet some torturing suspicion, by murmuring to himself familiar verses of prayer and psalm; there were the women who became hysterical. Each and all of the half-dozen people to whom the nocturnal visitor first appeared retreated in dread and were sensible only of their own feelings at sight of the apparition. Not one had a pitiful thought for it. But lastly it came to a woman who wondered if the poor, restless spirit had not come to make some request; if it were in pain and longed for relief, or sinful and strove for forgiveness. How dreadful then that other beings should flee from it instead of meeting it resolutely and kindly. So she prayed for strength to forget any selfish fears and try only to know the spirit's need. As she prayed the foolish shrinking dread seemed to pass away. Her heart overflowed with love toward everything in the world. She took the poor, cold spirit into her arms, pressing it to her breast, comforting it. And the spirit, which had only been yearning for some one to understand, to sympathize, grew warm in her embrace and whis-

peared: "It is enough. I shall be no longer lonely. For now I know what God is." And it went away happy and in peace.

It seems to me that more than one of our social specters might be laid if we would approach them in the desire for helpfulness and in the spirit of brotherly love.